Open-ended transitions to adulthood: metaphorical thinking for times of stasis

Article (Accepted Version)

Accepted for publication in Sociological Review October 1st 2020, final version.

Open-ended transitions to adulthood: metaphorical thinking for times of stasis

Rachel Thomson & Jeanette Østergaard

Introduction

Around the world, contemporary young adults face many challenges as they wait and move in search of work, opportunity and experience. Writing about post-industrial America, Lauren Berlant (2011) skewers upward social mobility, job security, equality and durable intimacy as so many 'fraying fantasies' increasingly unavailable to the majority of the population irrespective of self-belief and determination. It is an analysis which echoes in Northern Europe, especially the UK, where the protective carapace of the welfare state no longer promises social reproduction or cradle-to-grave social security. What, she asks, happens to notions of the 'good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation' (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). Importantly, Berlant does not abandon the project of seeking out and witnessing life stories, but she does demand that our analytic project to understand the conditions of existence in contemporary times is not complicit with wider narratives of compulsory progress and development. Letting go of the fantasy of the 'good life' involves us in conceptualising open-ended transitions consistent with 'life without guarantees' (Berlant, 2011, p. 192).

The purpose of this paper is to link this theoretical argument with methodological strategies that can capture everyday meaning making including the kinds of metaphors that young adults reach to in order to convey their lives and desires. Our contribution is part of a growing body of critical, participatory and often arts-based projects that renew sociological discourse with the imaginative resources of social actors (Back, 2012; Coleman, 2017 Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Nolas et al. 2019; Smith & Dowse, 2019; Bakkali, 2019, Bopddy *et al.* 2020). The paper draws on our current research in which we explore the biographies of young people growing up in contemporary Denmark – living with the benefits of a highly developed Scandinavian welfare state that still provides free education, social support and low youth unemployment (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Jørgensen et al. 2019)[i]. Our intention is to share a conceptual and methodological framework animated by Danish examples, which could provide illumination and inspiration as to how to approach open-ended transition more broadly.

Thinking through metaphors

Sociology leans heavily on metaphor in the building of concepts: we might think of the extended metaphors of 'capitals' and 'the game' in the work of Bourdieu (1986) or of 'performance' and 'the stage' for Goffman (1959). The enrichment of meaning that can be gained by transposing one object onto another is an essential feature of language and culture. In their classic work *The Metaphors We Live* by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) reveal metaphor as a systematic practice linking human bodies to the naming of objects, relationships and abstract ideas. Most metaphors are invisible to us, simply taken for granted in everyday discourse. New metaphors are exciting and contentious –

characterised in Nietzsche (2000) terms by a 'sensuous force'. Stephen Jay Gould argues that 'when we are caught in conceptual traps, the best exit is often a change in metaphor' (Gould, 1991, p. 264), something acknowledged by John Urry in his proposition for a sociology based on metaphors of mobility (Urry, 1999). Yet metaphors can also operate in conservatively, connecting in ways that reduce rather than enrich our social imaginaries (Devadson, 2011)

The field of youth studies has been characterised by a self-conscious use of metaphor with the term 'transition' the focus of debate. The term is associated with a life course framework in which we journey from birth to death through a series of transitions, characterised by movement between dependence and independence. The youth transitions model is also a modern political metaphor in which the welfare state shadows the human journey from cradle to grave, with a social contract ensuring collective social security. As the welfare state is undermined, with universal securities replaced by notions of a safety net, the idea of transition is also increasingly suspect. In the 1990s Furlong and Cartmel (2006) proposed that the youth transitions of the past were like train journeys, where the public travelled en masse, getting on and off at fixed points at the same time. The increasingly individualised transitions of the 90s were like car journeys where the timing and the route could be personalised. A subsequent proliferation of metaphors in the field focused attention on questions of synchronicity, speed and direction of travel: transitions could be accelerated or stretched/ delayed/ stuck/ broken down; routes might be disrupted, fragmented or recursive[ii]. A new wave of youth studies has stayed with notions of travel, making space for stillness (for example Jeffrey's notion of 'timepass' (2010) derived from the cultures of lower middle class young men in India) or further personalisation (for example Leccardi's (2018) conceptualisation of 'me time' to describe the response of young Italians to institutional failure in delivering collective transitions. The latest wave of metaphors captures a loss of direction – for example Karlin (2019) mines Ingold's (2007) work for the metaphor of 'wayfaring' to make sense of the tentative biographical methodologies of new graduates feeling their way through new environments. Cuzzocrea (2020) introduces the metaphor of the pinball, where notions of progression or completion are overtaken by the immediacy of gameplay where the ball must be kept in motion.

These approaches maintain the underpinning bodily orientation of the metaphor, which sees the future and independence as ahead and in front and the past and dependence as behind. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call this UP=GOOD/ FUTURE+ BEFORE US. Queer theories emerging from the humanities disrupt these normative chronologies and associated assumptions that connect the body, life course, citizenship, nation and future. Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) suggest we think about 'growing sideways' rather than growing up and Elisabeth Freeman (2010) plays with notions of past, present, future and temporal orientation, suggesting terms such as temporal drag, re-enactment and retrofuturism. Queer theory suggests that such approaches might help us understand the lives of those who have not done things in the 'correct order' and whose inability or unwillingness to deliver reproductive futurism render them as outsiders, failures or rebels. For Berlant (2011) queer theory provides intellectual resources able to recognise the value of 'wild living' or ['living] outside belonging' (Berlant, 2011, p.198), replacing tautological metaphors of transition (we don't know where we are going) with terms such as 'glitch' and 'interruption'. She contributes the metaphor of the impasse as a way of staying close to lived experience without presuming destinations. The impasse may include 'gestures or undramatic action that points to and revises an unresolved situation'; 'doggy-paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure' (Berlant, 2011, p. 199).

In temporal and spatial terms the impasse is rich without being progressive – characterised as 'a delay that demands activity… impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading', 'a thick moment of ongoingness', 'a middle without boundaries' (Berlant, 2011, p. 200.) These arguments echo the critique of forward focused developmentalism made by the sociology of childhood in the 1990s, problematizing the idea that childhood was always a process of becoming and never a state of being (James et al. 1998). These are the theoretical resources that help us understand cultures of waiting such as hanging-out, unemployment, lock-down and incarceration – what Baraitser (2018) characterises as 'enduring time'.

Metaphors as methods

One of the thrills of working with metaphor is the way that it operates at different scales (Devadason, 2011). Metaphor connects the material embodied world to language and theory through a chain of sensuous abstractions and transpositions. Metaphor not only confounds the mind/body split in a way that excites object-oriented philosophers such as Harman who writes of 'a good metaphor's ability to "dig underground into the cryptic life of things" (Harman, 2005, p. 122). Metaphors also destabilise the kinds of boundaries between data and analysis that have traditionally underpinned empirical research – metaphors are in theory but also in talk, everyday language and popular culture. The search for metaphor can be a method of interpretation (Mann & Warr, 2016) as well as an object of study (Gordon & Lahelma, 1996). For example Gordon, Tuula and Lahelma (1996) report on their study of Finnish secondary schools in which they directly invited young people to produce metaphors: asking them to complete the phrase 'school is like…' and then using these metaphors as ways of organising the analysis of an ethnographic study. Some metaphors are familiar (the school is like a prison), some are generative – in that we can begin to see how it might be possible to think about one thing through another (the school is like an ants nest), and some are oblique (the school is like a cloud). These metaphors, offered by the pupils, are seen as starting points for analysis. For example the ants nest metaphor provides a way for interpreting material that appears at surface to be chaotic but with concentration reveals order and purpose and counterposes inner sanctums of stillness and power from peripheral spaces of movement and labour. Working with Lefebvre's (1974) notion that metaphors 'translate, invent and betray' Gordon and Lahelma (1996) are not only interested in thinking about how and why certain metaphors come to hand, but also how they might be working with multiple metaphors as a way of building up insight at different scales. Ricoeur (1977) captures this vertiginous aspect of 'metaphorical discourse' by explaining that metaphor operates as a redescription of reality, allowing both 'is' and 'is not' at the same time'. So whether we are seeking new ways of conceptualising a phenomena or whether we are listening closely to the everyday talk of the culture – we can be alert to figurative speech and metaphorical discourse as the kinds of 'gestures and undramatic actions' valued by Berlant (2011), asking what it is that they achieve and how.

The study

This paper draws on a qualitative longitudinal study of the lives of young Danes followed by researchers since they were 17 years old when sampled from a large quantitative cohort study following 6000 children since birth (1995). The sample have been interviewed three times in 2013, 2015 and 2018[iii]. We followed prescribed ethical standards (Riele & Brooks, 2013) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Our analysis of the 60 interviews conducted in 2015 when the young people were 19/20 years old showed that they were self-conscious about timing, locating themselves as on, off, behind but rarely ahead of schedule (see Østergaard & Thomson 2020). We noted their propensity to report language of parents, educators and policy makers – a normative discourse replete with metaphors of endeavour and futurity. Some talked about how they had been on 'a steady relaxed progress' since high school, whereas others were less hopeful conceptualising, for example, their life as 'an uphill battle'. There were also signs of resistance to this progressive narrative with several reports of 'experimenting' and paradoxical assertion that 'I am waiting to pull myself together'. In listening carefully to these accounts we sensed a falling into line with the notion of forward facing progress, but also an oblique questioning of the inevitability of transition and perhaps a sense that the order of things might be reworked.

For the next stage of the study we were keen to facilitate a different way of talking, diverting conversation away from the normative discourse that both participants and interviewer have in common (see also Wilson, 2016) anchoring attention materially in participants' lived lives. Drawing on the experience of one of our team in developing innovative methods within repeat interview studies (Thomson *et al* 2011, 2018), we invited participants to share and talk about an object that symbolised the last three years, the time elapsed since their previous interview in 2015 (age 19/20). Our intention in doing this was to enrich the encounter, decentring the interviewer and facilitating more control and direction on the part of the interviewee. One aspiration for this approach was the imagining of participants as analysts of their own lives –opening up of what Bourdieu calls an 'extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but was already there.' (Bourdieu et al. 1999, p. 614). In our previous experience we have found that the object-based conversation can exceed our expectations, enabling something to *happen* in the interview (Thomson 2012). The integration of material culture and personal belongings into research interviews has antecedents within social and cultural research, an approach that facilitates synergies between ethnographic and talking methods (Kuhn, 2002; Young, 2005; Miller, 2010; Pink, 2012; Hurdley, 2013). Personal objects have the potential to facilitate Ricoeur's (1977) metaphoric discourse, a way of thinking and talking both poetic and ambiguous. In practice the invitation to choose an object was taken up in different ways by participants and by different members of the research team. Only two participants had forgotten and could not explain what they would have chosen, when asked during the interview and one person refused. Overall, however, the young adults responded well, when invited to bring an object to the interview. A typical response was "When you asked me, I knew exactly what to take".

A schema for biographical objects

For the purposes of this paper we have drawn together the object-oriented conversations, exploring what they had in common, and alerting us to what may be missed by direct-talk based methods. This first part of the analysis captures how young adults responded to the invitation, enabling us to gain insight into the range of experiences and preoccupations that face Danish young adults. The second part of the analysis works with three objects that exemplify the metaphorical discourse that can be generated through this method: a bunch of keys, a jewellery box and a broken watch. The two-stage analysis mirrors our journey through the material, involving a process of sorting, conceptualising and categorising how objects were used to mark time and maturity – before engaging with the accounts of learning and enrichment that they allow. The classification of objects that we offer is a necessary failure: useful in alerting us to

the institutional spaces and cultural motifs that young adults navigate by, but which are destabilised through the irony of young people's accounts. Nevertheless we see value in this futile endeavour, in that it helps us understand what is 'to hand' for these young adults and this may act as an interface between a personal biography and modes of collective or institutional time-keeping. We arrived at this schema through an inductive analysis of the young people's stories, focusing attention both on how we might read the objects (what do they represent in terms of a life stage) but also how are they used by young people to generate an account – even an analysis of self. As the schema developped we began to understand that by approaching young people in and through objects we could access the kinds of open–ended and sideways dimensions of maturity that involve stasis and recursivity and which are often eclipsed in our focus on growing up.

Trophy objects: These are objects that ostensibly mark an achievement. One example of this is the formal marker offered by institutions on qualification or completion of a programme of activity – for example the pin that Alexandra shares as a marker of completing training as a nurse. Alexandra explains that this is something that has changed her – given her confidence, moving her from feeling as though she were 'standing behind someone to standing in front'. Two young adults offered markers of military service (in Denmark mandatory for all physically fit men over the age of 18). Fin offered his military cap – explaining that it not only captured what, on reflection, he now understood as the best time in his life – but because it was also associated with a subsequent crisis of doubt and self-definition which resulted in his decision to abandon a career in the military.

Keys are a popular motif of adulthood – signifying the 21st birthday in both Britain and Denmark, a clichéd marker of adult responsibility. Not surprisingly then, keys were offered as biographical objects by several young adults, but usually with a sense of irony. For example, Hans places a bundle of keys on the table explaining to the interviewer that he may be 'an adult on paper' - having an apartment with his girlfriend, a permanent job and a car. But what is important to him at this point is that he feels ready to start the emotional work that will enable him to fulfil his personal definition of adulthood. In his words: 'If you know who you are and you feel you are comfortable with who you are, then I think you're grown up.' Charlotte also shares the keys to her new apartment. But as she does this, she explains that it is 'a joke'. Moving out from home to your own place is supposed to make you an adult, but in her words 'It is just the starting point'. For Holly keys represent both her home and a business venture, a small antiques shop that she has pinned her hopes and limited resources on. There is nothing amusing or even happy about Holly's keys, they speak of a serious and solitary undertaking involving personal sacrifice and risk. These objects can all be understood as trophies in that they are durable rewards acting as material recognition of experiences. We might even capture the martial origins of the word, suggesting these are the spoils of combat and struggle. But they are also distinguished by the coming together of personal and institutional temporalities. They are ticks in a box - *I did this thing, is this how I should feel?* These are moments of pride and achievement, but also of questioning as to the relationship between the self and the social institutions to which we expect to be synchronised. In classifying these objects as trophies we are recognising the claims made by participants on these wider institutions while also hearing their critiques (see also Leccardi, 2018).

Hobby objects: several young adults shared objects that captured a personal passion or interest. This may be a leisure pursuit (for example Gorm's racing suit – a pastime he enjoys with his Dad) or hobbies that have turned into potential or desired career paths. For example, Carsten chooses the Wutang Clan's 'Enter the 36th Chamber' both as marking a key moment in the history of Hip Hop and the beginning of his fledgling career as a music producer. Similarly, Torben's choice of a football enables him to talk at length about the time investment needed to get to his semi-professional status – an achievement, yet one with significant opportunity costs in finishing his education. Johan offers a set of technical drawing pencils as his object and talks about his ongoing determination to realise a childhood dream of becoming a car designer, which will involve considerable personal and economic sacrifice, geographical mobility and uncertainty. Hobbies may also be vices and Ernst presents the researcher with a small package of hallucinogenic drugs (LSD and ecstasy) which he describes as capturing 'a general picture of my stupidities' over the intervening three years. Yet Ernst goes on to describe a period of mind expansion and personal growth. He uses the interview space to detail his participation in a psychedelic subculture that involves meeting up with like-minded people and taking mind expanding drugs in woods as well as discovering a more sordid and risky side to drug culture involving people overdosing and becoming entangled in frightening criminal networks. Bravado stories of passing exams while tripping are counterposed with vulnerable accounts of depression and isolation – raising questions for the researcher and perhaps himself about the fine line between drug taking as a hobby or an incipient addiction. It certainly involved a kind of journey, as Ernst says 'I have been allowed to change my opinion … looked at the other side'.

These objects bring us into contact with preoccupations and practices that gradually shape bodies, minds and worlds – attuning young people to particular experiences and isolating them from others. The question of whether these activities are ways of enjoying, passing or wasting time - or whether they add up to something more (generally understood in terms of paid employment) haunts these accounts. There is something anachronistic about the idea of the 'hobby', predicated on clear boundaries between work and play and gendered modes of socialisation. In proposing that these objects may represent 'hobbies' we respond to the uncertainty associated with activities around the objects, noticing that it is young men who are questioning the value and consequentiality of the activities described and making themselves vulnerable in the process.

Mortal objects: Many of the objects shared by the interviewees connected to an 'eventful' time (Adkins, 2017) dense with importance and biographically 'fateful' (Author et al 2003). Materialisation in objects which then allow for a meditation on that time. We began by conceptualising the objects gathered here in terms of marking turning points in that the stories associated with them emphasise change, that not only includes a new orientation into the future but a reframing of the past. However, working through this category also alerted us to the centrality of the body to several of these accounts and how the body itself can be understood as a materialisation of the 'complex and chaotic' interplays of past and present time (Smith & Dowse, 2019). An original categorisation of 'fateful objects' was revised to become 'mortal objects'. In including mortality in our categorisation we connect with the *memento mori*, a practice in human made material culture that stretches back to antiquity where an awareness of death enables a full understanding of life and agency. This enriches how we understand stories of changes brought on by the actions of others – so for example Freda shares a fridge magnet that marks her decision to become a blood donor, an altruistic act in response to her boyfriend ending their relationship. Henrik is stopped in his tracks by a serious injury

and presents an x-ray of his damaged knee, reflecting on a new sense of fragility. Holger's epiphany is materialised in a bottle of Ritalin. He explains that he was informally diagnosed as having ADHD by a peer from his class at university. Formal diagnosis and treatment transformed his sense of wellbeing but also gave rise to conflict with his mother who refused to accept Holger's diagnosis. Holger is now preoccupied by the consequence of this denial, rethinking what she had assumed was a good relationship but also considering that his mother herself may have the same undiagnosed condition. The battle for maturity is also a battle over the body, which begins at birth and continues throughout life. These are moments of crisis in the young adults' lives, with chosen objects materialising struggle, loss, connection and separation as part of the human condition rather than simply being badges of achievement.

Connective objects: Several young adults choose objects that connected them to family, to place and to the past, suggesting that young adulthood is a moment that involves looking back as much as looking forward. So for example Fiona chooses a political poster that her mother had had on her own dorm wall when she was a student, asserting her place in a family tradition of political activism. Sanaz chooses a piece of embroidery made by her grandmother to mark her departure to America. The object gives rise to a complex story of misrecognition and mistiming with Sanaz changing her mind about the trip while her grandmother herself leaves Denmark in order to attend a family funeral in Iran. The object connects Sanaz to her ethnic roots, and while she would not have it in her ideal home (she 'doesn't like Iranian things'), it is nevertheless 'the most meaningful thing' that she possesses. Other objects also connected places as well as people. So for example Pauline, who has had to leave her home town for work, offers her mobile phone as her chosen object emphasising a desire to hold onto the security of family and neighbourhood friends while trying to establish herself in a new environment. Physical displacement is also a theme for Sune who shares two key bunches reflecting his two lives in Copenhagen and Aarhus. His homesickness for Copenhagen is represented by a little mermaid key fob that he bought in a tourist shop – the first time he had entered such a place and experienced himself as an outsider in his own home town. These examples indicate the costs associated with the kinds of geographical mobility associated with contemporary young adulthood (moving for education, work, love) and how managing continuity is central to maintaining vital resources over time and space. Our invitation to young adults to share an object (connecting two interviews three years apart) was itself tapping into practices of giving, receiving and passing on that help us anchor, spread and fix ourselves over time and space.

Protest objects: So far we have used the categories of trophy and hobby objects to reveal something of the ways in which young adults enmesh their passions and practices with external markers of adulthood. The categories of mortal and connective objects draw attention to the biographical work this involves as movement is marked, safety is scaffolded and divergent biographical tempos and locales are brought into rhythm and alignment. While many of the stories associated with these categorisations were characterised by ambivalence regarding a normative project of 'transition' there were a number of young adults who presented objects in a way that we have interpreted as protest or refusal. These young adults are not telling a story of overcoming adversity but pushing back at the problem. Gitte shows the researcher her boxing glove tattoo – explaining that she focuses on the tattoo to convince herself that she can get through difficult life events which she feels unprepared for - such as supporting her father through serious illness and running a difficult kindergarten. Rather than acting as memento mori, these objects are *talismans* invested with supernatural powers that conjure

up a place of safety and a repository for anger. Gunvor explains that there is 'something that holds me back' and offers her teddy bear, something that she has had since childhood and which she refuses to give up. She explains that she hides it away when boyfriends stay over. The bear and her desire for comfort help us understand how Gunvor's back is turned to the future as she expresses frustration with post-divorce repartnered parents who want to move on with their lives and no longer invest in family holidays (Thurschwell, 2019). These young women make a valuable contribution to the study by giving insight into the loss associated with independence. If an awareness of separation and mortality plays a part in opening up the future, then its refusal may be implicated in a turning away. The body itself becomes a resort or source of meaning in these situations as we question the basic building blocks of meaning associated with development UP=GOOD/ FUTURE+ BEFORE US.

Sorting and conceptualising objects and associated talk in the way we have done here involves asserting affinities between objects enabling us to see the work of adulthood in novel ways that displace without removing normative models of transition. This is a schema of objects rather than people, drawing our attention to the ways that experiences are materialised, mediated and institutionalised – the work of being in time. If young adults are living in the impasse then we need methods that are able to capture open endedness, recursivity and sidewaysness. The project of sorting and conceptualising the kinds of object-talk produced by this method has been generative of the kind of connective multi-scalar promise associated with metaphor – rooted in bodily orientation yet shaping political imaginations and biographical understandings. This is not offered as a replacement for the typologies of transition that characterise youth studies, but we suggest that it may provide a generative alternative that is inclusive in interesting ways.

Evocations of metaphorical discourse

Objects can bring into language intimate and difficult knowledge arising from being in time, connected to others. The 'evocative object' cuts across the categorisation above, allowing us to emphasise the richness and ambiguity of the talk that arose in the object-based interviews. Within therapeutic and pedagogical fields the value of objects for meaning-making is recognised, conceptualised as the 'common third' of social pedagogy (Cameron & Moss, 2011) or as containers for projections in counselling (Bollas, 2009). Objects can be safe starting points for stories that are both personal and analytic. In Turkle's words, evocative objects are 'things we think with' (Turkle, 2007). As we move into this more personal terrain, we suggest that the three cases can be seen to exemplify how objects facilitate a metaphorical discourse conveying complexity and enabling the co-production of meaning within and beyond the interview situation.

The Keys

Like many of the other young adults, Mogens shared his keys and used them as a way of sharing his pride in building a recording studio, as part of his vocational training. He explains:

> In the 3rd year you have to make a project and we said - let's just build a studio and make something for real [laughs] and then we did. So, here we are now – we have had it for a few years, as I took over the premises back in February last year and have built it all. So there were just 300 sqm that had to be rebuilt.

Together with his friends, Mogens turned a collective school project into what today is his part time profession - a professionally run music studio. However, the magnitude of the challenge of learning how to build a studio was clearly overwhelming, as Mogens described the work as a long 3-4 months process, with very few hours of sleep 'an average of 3 hours of sleep 7 days a week'. The collective student project then becomes a project of self-knowledge and endurance, as Mogens says 'I learned some things about myself. And some things that I'm glad I learned. … things like this makes it possible to find out what you really are able to do'.

As Mogens' story unfolds it becomes clear that the meaning of the project is heightened by a parallel process in which his parents' company goes into administration. The company was something that he saw as being fundamental to his own character ('that's how my life was built'). But during the period he was building his studio 'they quietly let it close' – something he describes as a 'sour experience'. Mogens became involved in the process of closing the company down. His words suggest that he questions his parents' judgment in placing this responsibility on him, yet he also recognizes this as a shift in power in their relationship.

> That was hard, and I think they must have known that it was hard for me. I don't know if they are proud that they involved me. It certainly took a toll on me and on them. But I also felt that it was something I wanted, and that it was something I was ready for and could help to settle. It was like saying goodbye to it [the company] in a way.

It was during this time that Mogens moved into his new studio and began living there with his girlfriend. Home became little more than a 'hotel' for a 'few months when there was no place where security could be found because on all fronts everything was just chaos.' This is the time of the impasse, where it is hard to know what comes next. Mogens describes his approach taking 'one thing at a time…. you could not really do anything. Neither think nor talk or anything, so everything was also done wrong. Then you just laugh'. Mogens sees himself as having been changed by the experience.

> Now, I have got to the other side, that's what makes it an extra victory. Both because, I think that it will take a couple of years before I get over it completely. I notice that there are some nights when I can't really sleep because I'm just - I just think there are a lot of things from that period, but at the same time there are also days when you look like back on it and say "shut up you were cool". And so all those everyday problems that seemed annoying in the past, they are irrelevant "yes whatever". I think it has become much easier now because I have gained perspective and I now have that in the bag.

In some ways Mogens is describing a conventional middle class rite of passage – passing through a liminal period where old identifications are destroyed and after which nothing is the same again. Importantly, this is also a collective, relational and open-ended process that involves a reordering of family authority, responsibility and economic stability. Although his father is back in business, Mogens' mother is still struggling – both mentally and to get a job. It is a transition for his parents as well as Mogens. These are keys to the door of his own home, his own company and a form of adulthood. Yet they also stand in for an experience that has changed him, making him a more responsible and burdened person.

The jewellery box

Henriette chooses a jewellery box to represent her last three years. She explains to the interviewer that she struggled to choose a single item so decided on the box because together, the contents represent the 'framework of my home'. The items shared and discussed include a bracelet marking the date of her mother's marriage to her stepfather in 2003 – a relationship that she finds highly problematic. The box also contains a ring given to her by a boyfriend she met when she was 18 and who she is still in a relationship with, but about whom she conveys considerable ambivalence. As a 23 year-old she now looks at the ring as something that she is only now beginning to understand:

> I think somehow, it's been my impression, that it meant more to him than it meant to me at that point. But I wasn't very old either, and he was – what – 15 years older than me? So I think that the reason that it didn't mean much to me had to do with me not being very old. I was not old enough to understand what it actually meant at the time. But as I've grown, both literally and metaphorically, then it's like it means a lot more to me now because I realise how much it meant to him when he gave it to me. So it symbolises so much, what has happened inside of me over these last three years.

These are complicated and entangled temporalities suggesting that she and her boyfriend are out of synch. Significantly she explains that she no longer wears the ring, commenting in a cryptic way that she doesn't 'need to wear it because it means a lot to me'. She now keeps the ring and the bracelet safely in her box, explaining that 'I hide it and I find it now and then'. Henriette also explains that she sees much less of the boyfriend as she tends to be very busy these days and that she finds herself having to fend off enquiries from others as to how he is or where he is. Assigning the ring to the jewellery box, and to the 'framework of my home' not only resigns the relationship to the past, but evokes connection between the death of her father, her mother's remarriage and entering a relationship with a man almost old enough to be her father.

Henriette's emphasis on her own 'literal and metaphoric maturity' allows her and us to review this moment from a new present. She articulates something of the different motivations propelling herself and her boyfriend in such a way that his past and her present selves can share an understanding. The metaphorical discourse arising from the jewellery box provides a safe way of talking, allowing something to both be and not be at the same time, Henriette can reflect with the interviewer in a critical way without rejecting or rejection. This is a thick present, characterised by non-linear temporalities where it may be necessary to go backward before it is possible to go forward.

The broken watch

Esben brings an old wristwatch to his interview. He explains that his father gave the watch to him on the condition that he would have it fixed.

> But it's my father's old watch, Georg Jensen watch, he got when he was 18. Yes I was given it some time ago - at least a year or two ago. I was allowed to have it if I spent some money to make it like new - get a new strap and recharge your battery. I have just not really done that. I don't know if there is anything deeper in it. It may be an example of starting a project that you fail to finish

Esben goes on to tell a convoluted story about educational projects which for different reasons were not completed. One example involves him abandoning his studies because he felt compromised by receiving too much help from his classmates on his assessments. He is not prepared to 'keep up' if that means that he is not responsible for his own work. He accepts that his progress is not in synchrony with his peers. In another he describes how he lets down his father, caught out while skiving from a job with a local firm that he gained on his father's recommendation. The moral of each of the stories is captured by his phrase ' I have also disappointed them many times along the way with a lot of things'.

Esben continues to live at home, in an extension that his parents have adapted for him, so that he can experience a semblance of independence while staying close. This proximity can be painful as they are the constant witnesses of his stasis. When asked about how he responds to criticism at home Esben's response suggests that there is some uncertainty as to who is feeling what:

> What it's like is that I'm getting so sad. I am a bit angry about it but it's so sad that he's mad about it - that it's got him
> In: And it's your fault?
> E: and that's my fault. But there's also a part of me that seems like - in the end, I've done something wrong and that's, I know it was stupid, but nobody was injured. So I feel that it is a bit unfair that I should be judged for something that didn't hurt anyone.

The watch captures the relationship between an idealised version of self (the young man who deserves the watch) and the way that he is (unable to fulfil expectations). Yet there is also a note of protest here too. He didn't ask for the watch which was broken when he received it. It may be that Esben never wanted this watch, that his desires are different than those that his father asserts on his behalf. In bringing the watch into the interview space Esben is sharing a version of himself that – like the watch - is stalled. But it is hard to resist the interpretation that the time that is neglected is the time of the parental generation, the normative time of social reproduction. Esben is not quite sure what he thinks about the watch – but in finding and sharing it he gains motivation to address its provocations. He will fix it but he will not be dominated by it:

> Next month I will do it, I'll get a new battery and find a strap for it. I have set that up so now it's going to happen. I will go to [city] with it and find a watchmaker or whatever it's called down there, and so ... I will have to pay what it costs. It's still a little bit of money, and they have to sit and put a damn battery in it.

These examples are taken from Denmark and reflect what in relative terms is a wealthy society with a strong and intact welfare state. These are uniquely Danish stories, yet the insights that they convey have wider relevance in that they suggest a process through which we might move from everyday meaning-making to wider cultural metaphors for understanding. The examples show how young adults are actively involved in narrating themselves, both prospectively and retrospectively. Ideas of progress and transition continue to have salience, but stuckness and change, dependency, interdependency must be thought together. We are entangled with each other and with the materialities of our environment as well as with formations of welfare and the presence and absence of opportunities and support. The keys, the jewellery box and the broken watch operate powerfully as personal metaphors that allow us to see the recursive, layered and contested struggles reported here. Esben, Henriette and Mogens communicate a

profound sense of aloneness while also revealing the practices through which their culture and society calibrate access to adulthood.

Changing metaphors for a new age

This paper has offered a metaphor and a method for investigating the experience of contemporary young adults. As a method the object-based interview is productive precisely because it acknowledges and yet gets beyond a normative discourse of agency, progress and achievement. Our participants meet us half-way allowing for the 'extraordinary discourse' that Bourdieu suggests can be the starting point for a new kind of analysis. Chosen objects become a focal point giving rise to processes of mattering and meaning making.

Our starting point for this paper is that the sociological metaphor of transition has lost its traction, we experience a diminishing return in thinking this way. As the metaphor sinks into the taken-for-grantedness, its value is overtaken by frustration and critique as it fails to account for diversity, for experience, for the things that we want to notice. Old metaphors can be given new life by irony, for example 'the keys to the doors' gain meaning through pastiche and rearticulation. It still matters enormously to have one's own space and door, but updating the metaphor also involves wrestling meaning from one generation into another. New metaphors transpose one set of meaning into another in a way that provides fresh insight. We suggest that this happens in our data as young people invite us to think about their situations *as if* a jewellery box and a broken watch. These materialisations of the self pivot attention towards a thicker temporality in which the past saturates the present and from which a more ambivalent and sensuous relationship towards an emergent future can be discerned.

The transitions metaphor is a product of its time, speaking of a modernity in which documentation, measurement and comparison are part of a project of government, not only regulating but generating evidence of inequality. The youth transitions project has produced accounts of privilege and exclusion, of catching up and falling behind, of gaps that widen and close. At the same time it has produced typologies and categories that problematise – transitions can be failed, accelerated, disrupted. In letting go of the metaphor we need not also let go of the associated project of social justice that allows comparison and complaint. If our metaphors do not allow for a mapping of empirical findings against inequalities in a way that amplifies meaning then we must consider that these metaphors are attractive and compelling precisely *because* they allow us to turn away from uncomfortable territory. The 'open-ended transition' is then a compromise, a hybrid term – that asks us to look in two directions at once. Maintaining a focus on inequality – yet aware of the kinds of conceptual and emotional closures that are associated with its forward-facing futurity. The open-endedness of the metaphor demands that we make other things visible including the mundane work of being in time. The evidence explored in this paper suggests that this includes connectedness to others, the undertows of generational change, the problem of gathering and harnessing resources and a future that may be more difficult than the past. Inviting participants to choose objects through which to talk about their lives may not just illustrate but build theory. We propose that new metaphors can invigorate the fields of youth policy and practice and working with inclusive and paradoxical images may generative in the moment as well as accumulating into new ways of thinking.

References

Adkins, L. (2017). Sociology's archive: Mass Observation as a site of speculative research. In A. Wilkie, M. Savranky & M. Rosengarten (ED.), *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures'*, (pp. 117-129). London: Routledge.

Back, L. (2012). Live sociology and its research future. *The Sociological Review, 60*(S1), 18-39.

Bakkali, Y. (2019). Dying to live: Youth, violence and the munpain. *The Sociological Review, 67*(6), 1317-1332.

Baraitser, L. (2018). *Enduring Time*. Bloomsbury.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.

Boddy, J., Bakketeig E. & Østergaard, J. (2020) Navgating precarious time? The experience of young adults who have been in care in Norway, Denmark and England, *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(3): 291-306.

Bollas, C. (2009). *The Evocative Object World*. London Routledge.

Bond-Stockton, K. (2009). *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. et al. (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Cameron, C., & Moss, P. (2011). *Social Pedagogy and Working with Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Carabelli, G. & Lyon, D. (2016). Young people's orientations to the future: navigating the present and imagining the future. *Journal of Youth Studies, 19*(8), 110-27.

Coleman, R. A. (2017). A sensory sociology of the future: Affect, hope and inventive methodologies. *The Sociological Review, 65*(3), 525-543.

Cuzzocrea, V. (2020) A place for mobility in metaphors of youth transition. *Journal of Youth Studies 23*(1), 61-75.

Cuervo, H., & Wyn, J. (2014). Reflections on the use of spatial and relational metaphors in youth studies. *Journal of Youth Studies, 17*(7), 901-915.

Devadason, R. (2011). Metaphor, social capital and social imaginarie. *The Sociological Review, 59*(3), 633-654.

Evans, K., & Furlong, A. (1997). Metaphors of youth transitions: niches, pathways, trajectories or navigations. In J. Bynner, L. Chisholm, & A. Furlong (Ed.), *Youth, Citizenship and Social Change in a European Context* (pp. 36–44). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Freeman, E. (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Furlong, A. (2009). Revisiting transitional metaphors: reproducing inequalities under the conditions of late modernity. *Journal of Education and Work, 22*(5), 343-353.

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2006). *Young People and Social Change*. McGraw-Hill.

Goffman, I. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.

Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2005). Exploring complex transitions: looking back at the 'Golden Age' of from school to work. *Sociology, 39*(2), 201-220.

Gordon, T., & Lahelma, E. (1996). '"School is like an ants' nest": Spatiality and embodiment in schools'. *Gender & Education, 8*(3), 301-310.

Gould, S. J. (1991). Glow, Big Glowworm. In *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (pp. 255-268). New York: Norton.

Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court.

Hurdley, R. (2013). *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ingold, T. (2007). *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.

James, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. (1998). Theorizing childhood. In C. Jenks (ed) *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge, Polity Press, pp. 195-218.

Jeffrey, C. (2010). *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jørgensen, C. H., Järvinen, T., & Lundahl L. (2019). A Nordic transition regime? Policies for school-to-work transitions in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. *European Educational Research Journal, 18*(3), 278-297.

Karlin, L. (2019). *Graduates in Transition*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Kent.

Kuhn, A. (2002). *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, London: Verso.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.

Leccardi, C. (2018). Youth as a metaphor: an interview with Carmen Leccardi. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 23*(1), 8-23.

Lefebvre, H. (1974).*The Production of Space*. Oxford, Oxford University Press

Mann, R., & Warr, D. (2016). Using metaphor and montage to analyse and synthesise diverse qualitative data, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 20*(6), 547-558.

Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nietzsche, F. (2000 [1873]) "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense", in Cazeaux, C. (ed.), *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, (pp. 62-77). London: Routledge.

Nolas, S.M., Aruldoss, V., and Varvantakis, C. (2019). Learning to listen: exploring the idioms of childhood, *Sociological Research Online 24*(3), 394-413.

Østergaard, J. & Thomson, R. (2020) 'Thinking through cases: articulating variable and narrative logics in a longitudinal study of drug use and school drop out': *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23 (4): 423-436.

Pink, S. (2012). *Situating Everyday Life: Practices and Places*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Ricoeur, P. (1977). *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*. London: Routledge.

Riele, K. & Brooks, R. (2013). *Negotiating Ethical Challenges in Youth Research*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Smith, L., & Dowse, L. (2019). Times during transition for young people with support needs: entangled consequences, static liminal periods and contingent meaning making times, *Journal of Youth Studies, 22*(10), 1327-1344.

Thomson, R., Kehily, M.J, Hadfield, L. and Sharpe, S. (2011) *Making modern mothers*, Bristol: policy Press.

Thomson, R. (2012) Qualitative longitudinal methods as a route into the psychosocial, *Timescapes methods guide 13*. [http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/methods-guides/timescapes-r-thomson-ql-methods.pdf] ISSN 2049-9248 (Online)

Thomson, R., Ravn, S. & Østergaard, J. (2013). 'Tidslinjer som metodisk greb i studiet af vendepunkter i unges livsforløb' [Timelines as methodological approach in studies of critical moments in young people's life course]. In Rasmussen, K. (ed): *Visuelle tilgange og metoder i tværfaglige pædagogiske studier [Visual approaches and methods in interdisciplinary pedagogical studies]*. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag: 283-308.

Thomson, R., Berriman, L. & Bragg, S. (2018) *Researching Everyday Childhoods: Time, Technology & Documentation,* London: Bloomsbury.

Turkle, S. (2007). *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Urry, J. (1999). *Sociology Beyond Societies*. London: Routledge.

Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990). *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wilson, S. (2018). Haunting and the knowing and showing of qualitative research, *The Sociological Review*, *66*(6), 1209-1225.

Wyn, J., Lantz, S., & Harris, A. (2011). Beyond the 'transitions' metaphor: Family relations and young people in late modernity, *Journal of Sociology, 48*(1), 3-22.

Young, I.M. (2005). House and home: feminist variations on a theme. In S. Hardy & C. Wiedmer (eds) *Motherhood and Space*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp134-164.

i An overview of what characterises Denmark in relation to family life, fertility, housing, health, education, crime etc. and thus what it is like growing up in a Scandinavian Welfare State, can be found at Statistic Denmark: https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=28924&sid=dkinfigures2019

ii Our aim is not to review this literature, however important interventions include Evans & Furlong 1997; Cuervo & Wyn 2014, Furlong 2009, Wyn et al. 2011, Cuzzocrea 2020, Goodwin &O'Connor 2005.

iii In 2013, when the young people were 17 years old we began what we hoped to turn into an extended qualitative longitudinal study, piloting interviews with 23 young people (see Thomson *et al.* 2013). In 2015, an additional 47 young people were sampled and interviewed (age 19/20) (see Østergaard & Thomson 2020), and 13 young people from the pilot study re-interviewed. In 2018, we re-interviewed 50 of the total sample of 70.